

ESTATES' INVENTORIES

When historians have reason to wonder about the daily life of people who lived several hundred years ago, there are not many records to investigate. What would York County residents have possessed two centuries ago besides the objects that have survived (luckily) and are displayed in museums and historic houses (like Brattonsville)?

Probably the best source of information on household and personal possessions is preserved in the courthouse (or microfilmed records of old court records). Called either "Estates Inventories" or "Sales Inventories," the records exist for several reasons.

If the deceased left no will, then his (or her) property would be sold at public auction to satisfy the creditors. The court would appoint five appraisers of the estate's goods and accept the appraisal of any three of them.

If the deceased left a will, then he might designate certain articles to go to his heirs and then order that all else be sold to pay his debts. In that case, the court would require a Sales Inventory to be kept of the auction's proceeds. When the deceased person was a storekeeper, the list could become quite extensive.

Among the first of the estates inventories was that of Joseph Davies which was drawn up March 7, 1791 by Nathaniel Irwin, John Smith and Thomas Barnett, appraisers. Their list is a good indication of what a household might possess in the 1790s.

Davies possessed the obvious "beds and furniture" (furniture was the term used for the mattress, pillows, quilts, sheets, etc.), and "all of the furniture of the shelf" which referred to dishes, bowls, and other cooking articles exclusive of "furniture of the hearth" which would mean the heavy iron pots, fire tongs, andirons, and such. Davies had mounting and locks for drawers, one "spaid", one old gun, one pair saddle wallets, some Indian crocks and pans, an ink stand, a black bottle and a 14-gallon "kegg". Davis also had 10 3/4 pounds of iron and 6 1/2 pounds of nails.

Most people made clothes at home. Evidence of this is in the Davies inventory. The parts of a loom (reeds, shuttles, temples, heddles, "reaths") were named. There was 11 pounds of wool, a pair of wool cards, 3/4 lb. of indigo, a flax break (used in preparation of linen cloth), a buckskin and a small fawn skin.

Joseph Davies had some education.. He had 2 Bibles, a geography book, a spelling book, 1 Tatler, a primer, and a music book. It is hard to say whether these items had been merely for home instruction of his children or whether he may have taught school.

Although no horse is mentioned, "Horse geers" was listed. He worked a small plantation although no land is specifically mentioned in the inventory. Evidence of this is in the inventory listing of watered hemp, scythe, sickle, and 1 bushel flaxseed. There was also a beescap and bees. and 395 pounds of tobacco.

Elizabeth Davies, the widow, was administrator of the estate. Besides the household goods, there were debts due to her husband. These included debts of William Hill (York County's famed early Ironmaster), James Duncan, Martin West, Thomas Barnett, Walter Davis and "Due from General New River, 5 pounds, 16 shillings and 8 pence." General New River was the head of the Catawba Indians. Ordinarily the white men owed him small sums for leasing the Indian lands. Why did New River owe Davies?

In "Charles Senseng's Hands" there was 1,500 lb. of tobacco. This is very unusual, especially when added to the 395 pounds in his inventory. That is a great deal of tobacco which might grow in York County but not extensively. At that date, it is probable that the tobacco was imported from Virginia. It is possible that New River owed Davies for tobacco used by the Catawba Indians. Was Davies a trader in tobacco?

Walter Davis' debt was in the form of 11 1/2 lb. of nails. In a money-scarce frontier society, it was not unusual for nails to serve as coins. A ten-penny nail was worth just that--ten cents. But Davis had more iron and nails than most and Col. "Billy" Hill, the Ironmaster, owed him rather than vice versa. No blacksmith tools are mentioned. Did Davis trade tobacco to Hill for iron?

Sometimes the early inventories raise as many questions as they settle.

By Louise Pettus